

# IMPLICIT FAITH: PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY AFTER SCHILLEBEECKX

*Stephan van Erp*

## 1. *Divisions in theology: Notes towards a Philosophical Theology*

### a. *The Anti-Modern Slant*

‘Only theology overcomes metaphysics.’ This is John Milbank’s conclusion in a chapter bearing that very same title in his book *The Word Made Strange*. Theology, he there writes,

If it wishes to think again God’s love, and think creation as the manifestation of that love, ... must entirely evacuate philosophy, which is metaphysics, leaving it nothing (outside imaginary worlds, logical implications or the isolation of *aporias*) to either do or see, which is not – manifestly, I judge – malicious.<sup>1</sup>

Based on the content of the rest of the chapter, it is important to note that Milbank does not suggest disconnecting theology entirely from all philosophy. Philosophy, he argues, serves a purpose as long as it is oriented towards ‘an always in any case implicit abstract reflection on the “context” of our ascent’. By this, he means a philosophy that is able to ‘convert the given into a gift, to receive love’ and to ‘admit the mediation of appearing and revelation via the judgement and right desire of “the inspired man”, even if it be equally the case that judgement and right desire are themselves entirely given’.<sup>2</sup> And he adds that he is referring to a concept of revelation

<sup>1</sup> John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997) pp. 36–52 (50).

<sup>2</sup> Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, p. 49.

which dates prior to early modernity, after which it became 'distorted' into a positive, actual content.<sup>3</sup>

Coming to a different conclusion but also referring to a premodern conception of faith, John Caputo has argued that theology and philosophy are closely connected insofar as they are inwardly structured by the sort of faith that is at work in each. He claims that:

[Faith] turns out to have a stronger hand to play, which is why ... the premoderns were onto something important. For faith is an elemental form of human life, a basic ingredient in our existence, as necessary as the air we breathe, and it proves to be an indispensable requirement for philosophy as well as for theology, which it turns out differ from each other in virtue of the difference between the faith that is in them, that is in each of them.<sup>4</sup>

Caputo concludes that the distinction between philosophy and theology is between two kinds of interpretative angles on faith, which is a given that both the philosopher and the theologian have in common.

Milbank's analysis of a rigid separation of modern philosophy and theology has radical consequences for his critique of theological reason and for the recognition of theological sources in particular. The givenness of judgement contradicts, according to him, the possibility of an independent phenomenology that could inform theology or even evoke new theological content. Theology therefore, he concludes, should resist metaphysics and avoid resulting in representational knowledge, but instead continue to be susceptible to the infinite source that has shaped the history of human ascent. Caputo claims that this infinite source is already and always present in metaphysical and representational knowledge, which are therefore not opposed to receiving the gift of the divine, but instead are the interpretative results of it.

Milbank however argues that only theological judgement participates in that which is given from this infinite source, and in order to maintain that participation, it should remain non-metaphysical through the active response to the givenness of the ongoing history it is part of. He considers modern philosophy however as being 'metaphysical' and positivist. He defines it as rooted in the secular immanentism of ancient philosophy, which forces it to seek a graspable, immanent security. Hence, it is unsuitable for theology. Theological judgement in turn is described by Milbank as

<sup>3</sup> In the chapter 'Theology overcomes metaphysics', Milbank expresses an adamant opposition to the philosophy of Jean-Luc Marion, claiming that Marion's position leads to asserting the truth of Christianity merely on the level of appearance, without giving any account of revelation as a historical continuity.

<sup>4</sup> John D. Caputo, *Philosophy and Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2006) pp. 57–58.

revealed judgement, and he disqualifies modernity for its misrepresentation of revelation as being co-constructible through knowledge and language, which according to him results in viewing the world, at its best, as 'a series of givens to be known, rather than gifts to be received and returned'. In short, according to Milbank, theological judgement is and should remain non-phenomenological, non-metaphysical and should be considered as revealed. Consequently, he argues, it cannot take its sources from modern philosophy or any cultural or social practice whatsoever, but instead it originates from and seeks its way to, what he describes as a pure form of *theologia*.

And yet, why is it that this theological origin should not be reflected upon with the help of modern philosophy? I would here like to argue against anti-modern and 'neo-orthodox' positions such as Milbank's. Resisting or resigning to the use of modern philosophy in contemporary theology unnecessarily leads to the division of theologians into so-called orthodox or revisionist and liberal camps. Dividing philosophical and theological schools into 'premodern', 'modern' and 'postmodern' groups is the result of modern philosophy itself and it does not do justice to a chronological description of the history of philosophy. Moreover, confirming these divisions involves a diversion from theology's core business, which is to reflect on God's salvific act in history.<sup>5</sup> School divisions in contemporary philosophy and theology are not very helpful to the furtherance of theological reflection and frequently result in methodological debates about the relationship between disciplines or cultural periods.<sup>6</sup>

## b. *The Modern Angle*

Through a rereading of Edward Schillebeeckx's theological metaphysics, I would like to show that contemporary theology can be the fruitful outcome of an ongoing conversation and connection of faith with modern philosophy. In my opinion, Schillebeeckx's application of a Kantian interpretation of an Aristotelian-Thomist metaphysics to modern theology is a clear example of this. Theologians should continue that conversation instead of presenting themselves as opponents of the modern. This is not only needed for reasons of analytics and academic or secular communication, as David Tracy suggested by distinguishing theology's audiences, in which philosophy

<sup>5</sup> Cf. John Webster, 'Theology after Liberalism', *Theology after Liberalism: Classical and Contemporary Readings* (ed. John Webster and George P. Schnier; Blackwell Readings in Modern Theology; Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 52–64; John Webster, 'Theologies of Retrieval', *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (ed. John B. Webster, Kathryn E. Tanner and Iain R. Torrance; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 583–99.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Ingolf Ulrich Dalferth, *Theology and Philosophy* (repr.; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001).

served as a rhetorical tool to reinforce theology's accountability within the academy.<sup>7</sup> Apart from the formal support that philosophy adds to the study of faith, I would like to claim that it is perfectly capable of reflecting on the material content of theology without 'maliciously distorting' it, as Milbank suggests. Instead, philosophy adds to or complements theology, precisely because, as Caputo claimed, it is motivated by the faith that has shaped both philosophy and theology.

A counterproposal to current neo-orthodox tendencies in philosophy and theology is the further development of a *philosophical theology*, which distinguishes but neither identifies nor separates practices of the given faith from its traditional and tradition-bound resources, discourses and worldviews. One of the distinctions theologians should particularly reflect upon nowadays is that between secular worldviews and the world of faith. Philosophy, like other academic disciplines applied to theology, is needed to make these distinctions. Instead of evacuating philosophy from theology in order to uncover a 'pure' theological centre of judgement, I would like to propose that philosophy is actively involved in discovering *and* forming constructive judgements of faith, and in understanding what constitutes theology *as* theology. The latter does not entail understanding revelation as an added, authoritative or decisive theological argument against an otherwise nihilist modernism. Here, Milbank's criticism of theology as a type of representational knowledge could equally be applied to a certain brand of authoritative traditionalism or positivism of revelation. Instead, philosophy adds to the (re)discovery and understanding of revelation as the actual, here and now dynamics of the divine Word in the world, also, and perhaps even especially there and then, where it is not or not fully confirmed as such, if only for acknowledging the experience that when it is confirmed or represented, it points at the particular contingency of its representation, rather than at the universality of its infinite source.<sup>8</sup> What we need to explore therefore, is implicit faith, at least in order to understand why more or less explicit forms of faith are inadequate or valuable. But also, from a Christian perspective, to understand why the contingency of life and the real is not an absolute limit, but ever anew susceptible to the revelatory event of the incarnation in Christ.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (Ann Arbor, MI: Crossroad, 1981).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God* (trans. John Bowden; New York, NY: Crossroad, 1990) pp. 72–77.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Schillebeeckx, *Church*, pp. 27–28.

## 2. *Understanding Being: De Petter's Theory of the Implicit Intuition*

Which phenomenology and which metaphysics could provide the material for the exploration of an 'implicit faith'?<sup>10</sup> According to Schillebeeckx himself, in twentieth-century Catholic theology, the choice was between the metaphysics of either Joseph Maréchal or Dominique De Petter, who was Schillebeeckx's philosophy teacher.<sup>11</sup> Both developed post-neothomist ontologies closely connected with modern epistemology. Maréchal argued that the validity of abstract concepts is founded on a non-intellectual dynamic of the mind. Knowledge then, is considered a projective act in which the concept transcends itself towards the infinite.<sup>12</sup> Maréchal's metaphysics is based on Kantian epistemology, which denies the possibility of knowing the *Ding an sich*. The *Ding an sich* functions merely as the transcendental limit of knowledge. De Petter criticized Maréchal for finding a solution for the antinomy of concept and reality outside the intellectual act itself, and ultimately denying true knowledge of reality itself. Although Maréchal tries to bridge the gap between reason and reality through a transcendental dynamic of the mind, he needs a non-intellectual patch to do so. De Petter, in turn, proposed to found his realist metaphysics on an intellectual act: 'implicit

<sup>10</sup> See also: Jeffrey D. Bloechl, *Religious Experience and the End of Metaphysics* (The Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion; Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2003); Hermann Deuser (ed.), *Metaphysik und Religion: Die Wiederentdeckung eines Zusammenhanges* (Veröffentlichungen der Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft für Theologie; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> The Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar presented the choice for a theological metaphysics as one between Kant or Goethe. According to him, Rahner, following Maréchal, chose Kant and Balthasar himself chose Goethe. Cf. Michael Albus, 'Geist und Feuer: Ein Gespräch mit Hans Urs Von Balthasar', *Herder Korrespondenz* 30 (1976), pp. 72–82 (76).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Karl Rahner, *Hearers of the Word* (rev. Johann Baptist Metz; trans. Ronald Walls; London/Sydney: Sheed and Ward, 1969) p. 59:

Consciousness grasps its particular object in a pre-concept of being (as we wish to designate this process of reaching out to grasp the 'more') and hence of the absolute breadth of its possible objects. In each particular cognition it always reaches out beyond the particular object, and thus grasps it, not just as its unrelated, dead 'thisness,' but in its limitation and reference to the totality of all possible objects. This is because consciousness, by being close to the particular in order to know it, also always reached out beyond the particular as such. The pre-concept is the condition for the possibility of the universal concept, of the abstraction which in turn is what makes possible the objectification of the datum of sense perception and so of conscious subsisting-in-oneself.

intuition'.<sup>13</sup> My proposal for the exploration of implicit faith resonates with the title of De Petter's article, 'Implicit Intuition'.<sup>14</sup> In it, De Petter tries to conquer the critical problem, that is, the antinomy of concept and reality. In this section I will offer a reconstruction of De Petter's metaphysics and clarify the philosophical background of Schillebeeckx's theology and my own thoughts towards a theology of implicit faith.<sup>15</sup>

*a. Being Constitutes the Intellect, but the Intuition of Being is Intellectual*

'Implicit intuition', as De Petter defines it, is the direct intellectual grasping of the concrete. 'Intuition', therefore, should not be understood as a sudden, accidental insight, which at best can be trained as if it is a certain type of sensibility or something to which one can 'open one's mind'. Nor should it be understood as a preparatory phase, from which all knowledge develops. Implicit intuition is not a pre-reflexive given either, which precedes active and conscious knowledge. It is however performed by the intellect, De Petter claims, while, on the other hand, implicit intuition enables the intellectual act to be a true grasping of reality. Therefore, implicit intuition is not an epistemic characteristic that is present in the intellect. It is a condition for knowledge that needs to be realized by the act of knowledge itself. This is why implicit intuition is not a warranty, serving thus as a coping-stone for a naive realist philosophy. The intellect and the abstract concepts it forms, play an essential part in the act called implicit intuition. Implicit intuition is 'a moment of intuition which is essentially included in the intellectual act, from which it has received its most essential meaning and in which it could be discovered through reflective effort'.<sup>16</sup>

De Petter's set-up for a Kantian influenced, but nevertheless realist metaphysics is an attempt to conquer every dualism between the knowing subject and the known object, despite the difference between reality's concrete particularities and the intellect's abstract and necessarily unifying constructions. According to him, both concrete particularity and abstract

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Concept of Truth and Theological Renewal* (trans. N.D. Smith; Theological Soundings, 1/2; London/Sydney: Sheed and Ward, 1968) pp. 18–22.

<sup>14</sup> Dominicus Maria De Petter, 'Impliciete intuïtie', *Tijdschrift voor Philosophie* 1 (1939), pp. 84–105.

<sup>15</sup> For an English interpretation of De Petter's metaphysics, see Philip Kennedy, *Deus Humanissimus: The Knowability of God in the Theology of Edward Schillebeeckx* (Ökumenische Beihefte zur Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie, 22; Fribourg: Universitäts-Verlag, 1993); cf. also: Robert J. Schreiter, 'Edward Schillebeeckx', *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century* (ed. David F. Ford; Oxford/Cambridge: Blackwell, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, 1997), pp. 152–61.

<sup>16</sup> De Petter, 'Impliciete intuïtie', pp. 101–02.

construction are an expression of the unity of being, which in turn is also the most fundamental and constitutive unity of the intellect, albeit implicitly and inadequately expressed in abstract concepts. This inadequacy however, he argues, is a characteristic of the concept and the intellect, not of the unity of being itself.

In short, De Petter argues that implicit intuition is an indispensable aspect of the intellectual act. This aspect only becomes explicit in the formation of knowledge through abstract concepts, which are expressions of truth, a truth that always presupposes the unity of being. Being is implied in the abstract expression, whereas the abstraction in itself cannot express this being. A concept is called abstract, because it does not encompass concreteness. In relation to the concrete, abstraction is forever imperfect. It is imperfect compared to complete unity, that is, the unity through which the abstract and the concrete can be understood together in their singularity of being. De Petter claims that this singularity of being or unity of being is the constitutive foundation of the unity of knowledge (truth), which is forever implicitly and non-conceptually implied in the intellect which makes itself explicit. This can only become clear through the activity of the intellect itself, when it expresses itself through the act of judgement and the formation of abstract concepts.

The being that is expressed with the abstract concept, guarantees the objectivity of the concept, De Petter stipulates. The abstraction has to be integrated into an ontological consciousness, because the unity of concept and reality is performed by the intellect, not by the abstract concept itself. The human mind can only form these concepts because of this ontological consciousness that is implied in the intellect. The realization of the inadequacy of the abstract concept diffusely explains how the abstract concept is the expression of an intellectual identity. Through this realization of the difference between the ontological consciousness and the abstracting intellect, the intellect finds the explanation for this difference in itself. This is the full meaning of the term 'implicitness'.<sup>17</sup>

## b. *The Judgement is Real, Intuitive and Intellectual*

Abstract expression is part of an explicit judgement which lays claim to the epistemic truth because of its movement from the abstract to the concrete. Yet De Petter questions how this movement is possible. The abstraction itself cannot complete the movement into the concrete. This, he claims, is only possible because of an implicit moment in the expression. In principle, this implicitness is identical in the judgement and the concept, but in the judgement (e.g. A is B), only that which is implied by the abstraction is to some extent made explicit by means of the copula 'is'. However, the copula

<sup>17</sup> De Petter, 'Impliciete intuïtie', pp. 86–87.

'is' can only function as the bridge between the abstract and the concrete if, apart from the standard copulative value, it is also given a judicative value. After all, if the term 'being' denotes the implicit consciousness of being, this term has a judicative value, because, according to De Petter, only the consciousness of being has the objective value of judgement.

A judgement therefore is not merely conceptual, but it also consists of a retracing of the abstract content to a concrete reality. The act of abstraction does not include the concreteness of the actual being, however. Therefore, to be meaningful, a judgement consists of a supplementary act by which the abstract content of a judgement is traced back to concrete reality. The structure of a judgement corresponds to that particular function: It consists of a predicate, as that which has to be traced back to the concrete; and a copula, as that which brings about the tracing. Now that the meaning and the function of a judgement have been defined as a supplement to the abstraction, it needs to be explained how a judgement connects the abstract content with the concrete. This is the question regarding the foundation of a judgement, to which the answer can be found in the moment of intuition of a judgement.

The solution of traditional Thomist philosophy for the problem of reaching the concrete from the abstract by means of a judgement is untenable, according to De Petter. This solution is the *conversio ad phantasmata*, i.e. reaching the concrete through a judgement by means of a reflection on the contents of sensory perception on which the abstractions are dependent. De Petter questions whether it can be taken for granted that, because of the dependence of the abstractions upon sensory contents, a judgement could retrace those sensory contents in the abstract concept, and in doing so, reach the concrete again. For De Petter's rigid realism, the act of the imagination is no option for connecting a judgement with the particular. The intellect cannot grasp concreteness in any other quality than that which is characteristic to it, that is, its intelligibility. The antinomy of the peculiar function of a judgement, of connecting the abstract and the concrete, is replaced by an antinomy of the sensory and the intellectual. Sensory perception does not grasp the concrete as concreteness. Although it experiences it as concreteness, the objectivity of an object can only be grasped by the intellect. Sensory perception however has to be regarded as a link between the concrete and the intellect, for how else would the intellect be able to define the function of sensory perception as a full experience of concreteness if it was not able to fully grasp concreteness itself, through the sensory perception?



*c. The Intuition is not Transcendental but Manifests Being as the Act of God*

Because of the conceptual unity, which the transcendental contents (being, one, thingness, etc.) of a judgement maintain in relation to the concrete, it has become clear that these transcendental contents are not interchangeable with implicit intuition itself. After all, implicit intuition itself has no conceptual unity and is therefore never expressed in the abstract concept. Intuition is the implicit expression of transcendental concepts in judgements and abstract concepts. With regard to the transcendental content, implicit intuition is the possibility of its functioning. This is how De Petter distinguishes intuition in the abstraction from the intuition in the transcendental contents of judgement. With regard to the abstraction, it functions as a way of reaching the concrete, whereas with regard to the transcendental contents it functions as the way in which the abstraction is able to reach the concrete.

According to De Petter, being is a pure act. By 'being', he means the fundamental constitutive act of the consciousness of being by which the intellect intrinsically and totally performs itself and forms the basic principle of its activity and self-realization. Being is not a static condition, but an ever-changing current of events and relations. Yet, metaphysical unity expressed by the term 'being' is a unity that is present in the fluid reality of the multiple, individual beings; even if it is a unity which can only be established in metaphysical reflection, as a principle for structuring, used by the human intellect in reality. Although the unity present in multiplicity can only be found by means of philosophical reflection and is not part of a spontaneous and explicit knowledge, this does not mean that it is only a metaphysical concept – that is, only used logically and formally – and not something which is present in reality. According to De Petter, metaphysical unity is being as act. The act of knowledge implicitly confirms its own foundation, as being itself. Being as such is not the *quod* of the act of knowledge, but the *quo*, the internal principle from which every conceptual expression derives its intellectual meaning and value.

In the last section of his article, De Petter identifies the unity of being with God, and the implicit intuition with the divine act that is pure intellect in itself. Without any sufficient explanation, De Petter concludes his article by saying that his theory of the implicit intuition shows the necessary complementary value of the Augustinian doctrine of illumination to the Aristotelian-Thomist doctrine of knowledge.<sup>18</sup> What else, he wonders, could manifest itself so completely in inadequate beings that create equally inadequate abstract concepts? And it is this supplementary statement that is unaccounted for, which would probably raise Milbank's attention, since

<sup>18</sup> De Petter, 'Impliciete intuïtie', pp. 103–04.

it comes so close to his own correction of Thomist metaphysics with an Augustinian Neo-Platonism.

### 3. *Understanding Faith: Schillebeeckx's Speculative Theology*

#### a. *Anticipation against Participation*

In the first volume of the trilogy on Christology, Schillebeeckx explicitly dissociated himself from De Petter's theory of implicit intuition. According to him, this type of metaphysics leaves no space for history and time, and for that matter, no space for context. The answer, he writes, to the Christological question of whether God's salvific acts are present in Jesus of Nazareth, should be demonstrable in historical experiences. He himself regards this as a clear break with De Petter and even with Thomas Aquinas. He argues that Aquinas was able to confirm the implicit participation of the totality of being in each and every particular experience and each and every separate abstract expression as self-evident, because it was also a socio-cultural reality, and therefore part of people's experiences there and then. Schillebeeckx believes however that in a secularized society that offers different religious options, the idea of *participation* that lies behind the metaphysics of the implicit intuition needs to be replaced by the idea of *anticipation*, so as to recognize that being is becoming in history. Consequently, Schillebeeckx adds, every universal truth claim will have to justify itself to critical reason, to which it can only present itself as a hypothesis: 'Being able to demonstrate the personal, socio-political, secular, historical relevance of the Christian faith (within a critical stance towards society and culture) thus becomes an indirect test of religious, faith-motivated utterances.'<sup>19</sup>

Schillebeeckx's Christology would therefore involve a clear break with the metaphysics of unity of his fellow Dominican and philosophical teacher De Petter, but also with that of Thomas Aquinas, and this for philosophical and social-cultural reasons. At this point, one could wonder whether Schillebeeckx has allowed contextuality and culture to fully determine and change the metaphysical foundations of (his) theology, or at least, the way in which he justifies the relation between the context and the content of faith. In the first part of his last monograph *Church: The Human Story of God*, where he meditates on the word 'God' and the experiences it expresses and produces, Schillebeeckx describes philosophical reflection on God as a 'distant context' in which people use the word 'God'. According

<sup>19</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (trans. Hubert Hoskins; New York, NY: Seabury, 1979) p. 619.

to him, philosophical traditions used to be rational and theoretical explorations of a presupposed belief in God. In this sense, he argues, it must be acknowledged that religions are the primary contexts of the use of the word 'God'. So, Schillebeeckx's pluralist concerns in his last book not only apply to religious traditions' internal differences or differences between religious traditions, but also to the difference of contexts in which philosophy and theology emerge.<sup>20</sup>

Should it be acknowledged, after De Petter's attack on a Thomist epistemology, and after Schillebeeckx's criticism of unifying metaphysical systems of participation and his recognition of philosophy emerging from a context different from theology, that we are far removed from Thomist philosophy as a foundation or natural conversation partner for theology?<sup>21</sup> Is this the consequence of Schillebeeckx's anticipation for the challenges for contemporary theology: religious pluralism, nonfoundationalism and postmodern thought, and the attention given to otherness, difference, absence, and historicity?<sup>22</sup> Like nonfoundationalists and postmodern thinkers, Schillebeeckx seems to reject metaphysics or first philosophies in favour of historical experience. Is therefore Milbank's criticism valid here, that these challenges have led to the confirmation of the world as a series of givens to be known, rather than gifts to be received and returned? Is there no independent phenomenology or type of metaphysics that could incorporate history and particular experiences into a theology that reflectively returns these gifts?

I would like to propose that for answering these questions, both the philosophy of De Petter and the theology of Schillebeeckx will prove to be most helpful, and indeed, in doing so, I am implying that I disagree with Schillebeeckx on his radical break with his philosophy teacher, although I do acknowledge their differences in language and focus as significant. But more importantly, rereading De Petter and Schillebeeckx from the perspective of contemporary theology could offer some tools for my explorations into implicit faith.

First, let us return to De Petter's metaphysics. His stress on the performance of the intellect as a necessity for being to appear as the implication of every judgement, is thoroughly historical. He does not claim that the intellect constructs being as such, nor does he support the type of phenomenology which claims that without the performing transcendental

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Schillebeeckx, *Church*, Chapter 1.

<sup>21</sup> Despite the strong analytical Thomist tradition in contemporary theology, see, for instance, John Haldane, *Faithful Reason: Essays Catholic and Philosophical* (London/New York, NY: Routledge, 2004) pp. 3-15; and Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Malden, MA/Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) pp. 74-76.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Thomas G. Guarino, *Foundations of Systematic Theology* (Theology for the Twenty-First Century; New York: T&T Clark, 2005) pp. 1-39.

subject, there is no being, because being by definition would be being-for-me. On the contrary, De Petter advocates a strong realism, without claiming that being *as* being is fully available in concepts or judgements, although it needs the intellect's performance to understand that the totality of being lies at the origin of every intellectual act. Intellectual judgement reveals its origin by being inadequate and diffuse, in other words, by implying that which it cannot reveal through its performance of grasping the real.<sup>23</sup> In De Petter's later works, he expresses a strong aversion to the concept of the *esse commune*, precisely because it ignores the historicity of the performing intellect. The contingency of beings, he claims, defies a confirmation of their unity, and the experience of their contingency can only negatively point at a unity that is absolute and fully transcendent.

It is this last statement that led to Schillebeeckx's conclusion that De Petter's metaphysics is a metaphysics of participation, which offers a worldview founded on a concept of absolute Being, and is undesirable for a contemporary culture in which the pluralism and historicity of events and ideas should be confirmed rather than transcendently grounded. But Schillebeeckx himself, in contrast with his own criticism of De Petter's metaphysics, has been perfectly capable of combining a metaphysics of participation and a theology of historical experience.

#### b. *Speculative Theology*

To demonstrate this, I would like to point toward two moments in Schillebeeckx's historical development, one in his early years and one in his later years. Both moments signify his own struggle with a metaphysical ambivalence that is integral to every experience of practiced faith, and which has led to reflexive forms of both positive and speculative theology. In the collection of articles in *Revelation and Theology*, Schillebeeckx defines positive theology as seeking insight into the development of revelation in the scriptures and the mystery of Christ into dogmatic theology.<sup>24</sup> According to him, a necessary condition for understanding this development is the reconstruction of historical experiences of salvation and the communal, ecclesial life that it shaped. This reconstruction however makes use of a reason that is illuminated by faith and allied with the history of faith. Neither the illumination of reason nor the historical continuity can be part of magisterial teaching alone, he argues, but should be performed

<sup>23</sup> Cf. David Tracy, 'On Longing: The Void, the Open, God', *Longing in a Culture of Cynicism* (ed. Stephan van Erp and Lea Verstricht; Zürich/Berlin: LIT, 2008), pp. 15–32.

<sup>24</sup> On 'positive theology', see: Edward Schillebeeckx, *Revelation and Theology* (trans. N.D. Smith; Theological Soundings, 1/1; London/Melbourne: Sheed and Ward, 1967) pp. 118–23.

## IMPLICIT FAITH

by speculative theology. Speculative thought continues to intellectually regenerate the connection of present day experiences with scripture and tradition. Apart from furthering the knowledge of faith through a reflection on the cohesion of the mysteries of faith and through the reconstruction of historical theological developments, speculative theology could also discursively rethink positive statements. But it should at the same time not overstate its demand of intelligibility. And he concludes:

Theology is always a ‘stammering’ in the face of the transcendent mystery of faith ... this humility [ought to be] not merely a question of words, but also something that must be apparent in the manner in which theology is practised. The attention of theology must always be directed to the mystery of salvation that is announced and not to the human means which help us to approach it. ... In the content of faith there is both a tendency towards incarnation in human thought and a fundamental resistance to rationalisation. On the one hand, theology should not sink into so-called ‘evangelism’, which is only aware of the mystery and the ‘folly of faith’, nor should it tend towards an uncontrolled incarnation, which is only conscious of the meaningful intelligibility of faith. ... Sound theology can only develop if it progresses diffidently between this Scylla and that Charybdis. It must actively maintain a constant tension between incarnation and disincarnation, between transcendence and humanising. ... the harmonious relationship between the impulse towards incarnation and disincarnation, at the level of theological thought, only come[s] about dramatically in conflicts and polemics, between stern excommunications and splendid syntheses. Throughout history, therefore theology is always passing through a crisis or growth, as a result of which its true face is always appearing in a purer form ‘until we all attain to the unity of the faith’ (Eph 4:13).<sup>25</sup>

### c. *Mystical Theology*

In *Church*, Schillebeeckx develops a mystical theology based on the notion of an ‘absolute limit’, of a radical finitude and contingency, which resonates with his balancing of speculative and positive theology, but also with his theory of the anthropological constants as theological foundations.<sup>26</sup> Both believers and non-believers, he acknowledges, share the experience of a radical finitude and contingency. By this, he hastens to add, he is not referring to situations in which people find themselves when they are most vulnerable, for example, when they are seriously ill or dying. (Schillebeeckx’s concept of the ‘contrast experience’ is sometimes wrongly interpreted as

<sup>25</sup> Schillebeeckx, *Revelation and Theology*, pp. 176–77.

<sup>26</sup> Schillebeeckx, *Church*, pp. 77–80.

such, as if it only occurs during or after certain dramatic events.) Neither is the experience of the absolute limit the same as Schleiermacher's *schlechthinniges Abhängigkeitsgefühl*, as it is not an immediate revelatory experience, a deep insight of some sorts. On the contrary, the experience of the absolute limit is given within every human experience as real. As the real in human experience, it refers to something that is not a by-product of experience, but to the implied confirmation of reality in every experience. Here, we find clear traces of De Petter's implicit intuition in the work of the later Schillebeeckx. The latter however moves from the epistemological to the theological. It is at the absolute limit that all religious and secular worldviews emerge, he continues. The modern view of religion as the choice to create another world, a supernatural beyond limits of the secular, is misrepresenting religious interpretations of this experience, as if religion, contrary to secular worldviews, does not do justice to contingency, but instead contradicts it with the escape to a transcendent reality outside the limit of finitude. Yet, there is, according to Schillebeeckx, a difference between religious and secular worldviews, in as far as the believer interprets the limit as a salvific divine presence in history, while the non-believer is 'locked up within the absolute limit, lonely with fellow human beings'.

Twenty years after Schillebeeckx wrote this, it may not be that easy to distinguish between believers and non-believers. In Western Europe and America, secularization has been followed by a cultural trend that some describe as the resurgence of religion. This does not mean that secular worldviews are diminishing. Instead, secular views mediate religious views, and not seldom implicitly or in language and forms that are yet to be recognized as religious. I am not just referring to the grey area of those ideas and rituals of people who are exploring forms of spirituality both old and new. Nor am I pointing at the so-called religious market in pluralist or multicultural societies. Instead, I think this is a time and an age to acknowledge new ways in which people with secular worldviews are associated with the history of an incarnate God, and are therefore connected with the people in the church. Theologians should explore the implicit associations and connections of contemporary secular culture with its religious past and present. This would not only serve the purpose of understanding the ongoing reform of churches and theologies or the appeal of conversions to Christianity, as Charles Taylor has done in his *A Secular Age*.<sup>27</sup> It would also make explicit what otherwise could be easily overlooked: the implicit faith in a divine and salvific presence in history.

With the support of philosophy, theology should be the study of the experiences at the absolute limit, asking why some believe or decide that the limit confronts them with a divine presence in the world and why some

<sup>27</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2007) pp. 728–72.

## IMPLICIT FAITH

do not. Moreover, theology's new task is one of description and understanding at the limits of contingency, seeking to comprehend both where and how the hopes and fears that people share assist in constructing their worldviews. At first sight, these constructions appear as the reassembly of the remnants of communities in history of which future generations may or may not be part. To be able to discover newness in that reassembly, however, it might prove necessary to disconnect positive from speculative theology, temporarily, for the sake of a specific type of descriptive exploration, a phenomenology of practiced faith in places where it is as yet not expected to appear. Schillebeeckx's mystical theology of the absolute limit thus points toward new tasks for contemporary theology: understanding the beliefs of non-believers as a different outcome of shared experiences at the absolute limit of contingency and exploring implicit faith in a world full of meaning, shared by believers and non-believers alike.

### Conclusion

One of theology's philosophical tasks – and philosophy's tasks for theology – is to speculatively search for and articulate an actual and ongoing incarnation of the divine in the world, in order to retrace and confirm *theologia* before it has become theology, which in its turn can only reflectively confess it, but certainly not speak it. Thus, it opens the possibility of an unexpected *locus theologicus*: implicit faith moves between the Scylla of revelation and tradition as imposed or exclusive theological foundations, and the Charybdis of culture and context as providers of ever-new theological embodiments. Modern philosophy, as the expression of, and reflection on worldviews, could well prove to be a carrier of implicit faith and one of the mediators of the *passivum theologicum*, as Schillebeeckx has discussed it.<sup>28</sup> Although the *passivum theologicum* signifies expressions of the remnants of a religious past, it may also provide the material for composing a future of hope. I have argued that phenomenology, metaphysics, or any form of speculative philosophy should not be ignored or excluded from constructive theology. Against Milbank, who has suggested that the present needs a theology proper, a positivist theological metaphysics of the gift, I have argued that the speculative and the mystical are needed to explore implicit faith, in order to be receptive to what is given in that, which manifests itself as fully secular. Therefore, modern philosophy should turn out to be the indispensable conversation partner for theology, because it perceptively and descriptively gathers experiences and expressions that might not immediately manifest themselves as responses or confessions of a giving and self-revealing God, but will in the end.

<sup>28</sup> Schillebeeckx, *Church*, pp. 65–66.